

A Feminist Reflection on Emancipatory Speech About God

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Truly knowing God is something almost anyone desires, whether God is a supernatural, divine being or simply the universe. The Christian conception of God is one of the most well-known and is the depiction of God that I grew up with. This reflection explores ways to make God more accessible to women everywhere while remaining true to the reality of God.

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Process Analysis

The road to creating my thesis has been long and winding, beginning with choosing a topic. My major in psychology lends itself to all sorts of different endeavors, both research and creative, but I wanted to do a creative project since my major is research-based. I wanted to explore the creative side of myself instead of continuing with research. Of course deciding on a creative project was easier than deciding what exactly to do, and I rejected many ideas before settling on one that seemed important at the time. My first idea ended up being more research-oriented, but it was a project I was initially excited about. However, halfway through I was frustrated with the lack of impact it would likely have on anyone including myself. At this point I met with my thesis advisor and discussed my concerns with my progressing thesis, and we came up with a creative project that has changed my perspective and helped me initiate difficult conversations with my family and those who are important in my life. My project is a series of reflections on the first six chapters of *She Who Is*, a book of feminist theology focused on the need for emancipatory speech about God, primarily in the Christian faiths, by Elizabeth Johnson. My goal for this project was to examine the need for emancipatory speech about God, but instead this reading has truly transformed the way I approach religion and God. The process has been incredible, and I cannot believe how far I have come toward understanding and reconciling my faith with my ideal of equality.

I did not initially approach this thesis as something that would be life changing, in fact it really began with a professor lending me a book. Dr. Powell and I would often discuss our love of theology after class and our frustrations with the Catholic Church and its frustrating lack of equality. During one of these discussions he lent me *She Who Is*, a book focused on feminist liberation theology and the need for emancipatory speech about God. I was immediately

enthralled with the reading and read several chapters in the following weeks. The next year as I was thinking about my thesis my mind went to that book, and I knew that I had to incorporate it somehow. Originally I wanted to use it as a supplement to a larger research project about the treatment of women within the Catholic Church, but with a work so powerful to me personally, I later decided that a series of reflections on the first six chapters would be more personally meaningful. I was raised in the Catholic Church, and both my parents have been devoutly religious for my entire life. My childhood was strict and adherence to the Church was not a question but an expectation. I attended a conservative Catholic grade school and high school where questioning Church teaching was discouraged. In spite of all this I have always been reluctant to wholeheartedly believe in all the Church teaches, particularly in regard to women. It was not until coming to Ball State and participating in my honors classes that I really began to understand my reluctance to accept what I had been told at face value. I learned that questioning was not a bad thing, and that questioning is a desire for deeper understanding, not a desire to attack or disparage the Church. I had also never thought about the implications of male exclusive God speech on women before reading Johnson's work. I reflected on all the opportunities I had been denied as a young person and all the subtle messages I had received that I was not enough, or that I had to try harder to live a God-like life than a man. Even though I have never had any desire to be a clergy person, the idea that I would never be able to be a leader in my faith confused and unsettled me. It was not until reading this book that I realized the exclusion of women from the priesthood has almost no biblical root, rather the root is cultural and patriarchal. My background in the Catholic Church is what first endeared me to this project, but at the end of this journey I find that my faith has been strengthened in a way I never thought possible. My

thinking on God and the Church has been dramatically changed, and I find I can relate to the divine in a completely new way.

After deciding on a topic, I had many unique resources I used while writing my thesis, namely the thesis class that was implemented for the first time this semester. I found that the brainstorming sessions with peers were incredibly helpful along with all the support we gave each other. Having deadlines and peer reviews really helped to make my thesis what it is, and of course, my advisor was extremely helpful with everything including organizing my thoughts and talking through difficult concepts whenever I needed help. The class also helped me become comfortable discussing personal feelings and opinions regarding a controversial topic. This prepared me for the task of explaining my feelings to my parents and family, something I have never been able to do before completing this project.

Although I was frequently frustrated during the process of my thesis, I am incredibly proud of the end result. Besides the reflections themselves, I also included my own title and image to go along with each chapter. Choosing pictures and titles ending up being my favorite part of the entire project and each has a meaning that I think captures the essence of my reflection and the most important parts of the chapters written by Johnson.

The first reflection is "The Problem with God." This is a reflection on the opening chapter of *She Who Is*, which overviews the argument of the entire book, as well as providing the key definitions of emancipatory speech and feminist liberation theology. It also provided the rationale for a need for emancipatory speech about God, hence the title of the reflection. There is a problem with the way we talk about God, hence the reason for Johnson's book and my project. The image I choose for this reflection is one that I find problematic in its representation of God. I found it in Johnson's book and thought that it perfectly captured a lot of what is wrong with the

classic conceptualization of the divine. The picture features the Trinity as three distinct persons, rising above a landscape, surrounded by angels. The depiction of God the Father is a very glorious man in robes and a crown. He is clearly a wise and great king, surveying the world He created. Jesus is depicted still on the cross, also looking down on the world. This depiction of the crucifixion is classic and reminds me of the crucifix in my home parish. Finally, the Holy Spirit is a dove sitting in the Father's hand, easy to miss at first glance. The Spirit is overshadowed by the glory of the Father and the humility of Jesus. The Father and Jesus are both clearly masculine in this image and there is no feminine anywhere within this picture. The ambiguous gender of God as given in Scripture is pushed aside in favor of a depiction of a powerful kin. Jesus is shown only in his humanness (and consequently his maleness), and the Holy Spirit is barely depicted at all, almost as if the third Trinitarian person was an afterthought. Although I find this image disturbing with its sexism, it perfectly represents the current image most people have in their mind about God.

My second reflection is titled, "Let Us Create Man in Our Image (Not the other way around)." This is a play on the first chapter of Genesis; when God is creating man, he says this to differentiate the difference between God and animals in that humans are made to be like God. The second part of the title comes from the notion that by modeling God only after men, the Church has actually created an image of God that is an incorrect representation of the divine mystery. Thus, worship of a male God is actually blasphemy and a crime against God. Humans should model themselves after God, not model God after themselves. The image I included with this chapter is called, *Elohim Creating Adam*, and for a long time this picture has been my favorite image of creation. The classic creation image is Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, but I find that picture portrays God as cold and distant in the creative process, nothing like the

loving father presented in early Genesis and described by Jesus. *Elohim Creating Adam* shows God very involved in the creative process, literally blowing his own breath into Adam, creating a being with intelligence and spirit beyond any animal. God is not a king in this image, but something otherworldly. God has enormous wings, but no crown or robes and the similarity between the face of God and Adam's face is striking. Although it is disappointing that the creation of woman is not also depicted I still love the intimacy between God and his creation displayed in this image and feel that it captures the essence of this reflection; humans should remember that we were created by God, and that does not give us license to create God.

My third reflection is titled, "Mother, Father, Sister, Friend." This references the need for a God who equally represents men and women instead of just representing men, which is the focus of this particular reflection. I chose this title because God is more than each of these words individually, an even greater than all of them combined, but the only words we commonly use referencing God are Father and Friend. The image I chose is of a mural in Belfast, Ireland. During my trip to Belfast last year, I was struck by this particular image, which includes three individuals. These individuals are not who I automatically think of when I picture God, however, they all can be the different representations of God presented in the reflection's title. The first person is Mother, the second Father, the third Sister, and all three are Friend. All the people featured in this mural are genuine humans, deserving of dignity and respect, and all can be adequate representations of God individually and together, as long as one is not elevated above the rest.

My fourth reflection is called "We are God, God is US." Originally the capitalization of the final word was accidental, but it seemed to capture the intent of the reflection better than the original capitalization so I kept the emphasis on the final word. This reflection centers on the

importance of finding God in the personal and within ourselves. What better image is there than a picture of a friend? This image was taken about a year ago at a botanical garden, and features my best friend surrounded by nature. She is in a place she loved and smiling, and I truly cannot think of a better representation of a God who is personal than this image. God is in each of us, and the light of God shines a little brighter when we are doing what we love with the people we love.

My fifth reflection, “Shekinah, Sophia, Mother,” was the first reflection I titled after completing the project. This reflection focuses on the biblical representations of the femininity of God, beginning with the motherly spirit of Shekinah and culminating in the actual Mother. My image for this chapter, fittingly, is of my own mother. For my entire life she has been a model of faith and God for me. Even though I reflected on the potential harms of the Mother imagery, I still see God in my own mother everyday. This image was the first that I picked to go along with a reflection because very early into this project I knew that I had to include a photo of my mother. She is the reason I have strained to understand my faith in a way that makes sense, and she is the one person I can credit with making me into the person I am today.

Finally my sixth reflection is called “If you have understood, It is not God. This phrase is a quote from Aquinas, frequently alluded to in the sixth chapter of Johnson’s work, which focuses extensively on the incomprehensibility of God. I chose this quote because I felt it perfectly fits with the message of the chapter and my subsequent reflection that God is ultimately unknowable. The image I chose for this reflection is an optical illusion. I chose it because it proves that something can look completely different to different people or in different situations. Neither is ‘right,’ rather there are just two different interpretations. When someone proclaims

there is a 'correct' way to view this image they are wrong, much like those who proclaim there is one way to speak about God are wrong.

Introduction

Elizabeth Johnson is a Roman Catholic theologian and her book, *She Who Is*, focuses on feminist liberation theology by describing the need for emancipatory God talk. Within the first chapter she defines feminist theology as “a reflection on God and all things in the light of God that stands consciously in the company of all the world’s women, explicitly prizing them for their genuine humanity while uncovering and criticizing its persistent violation in sexism, itself an omnipresent paradigm of unjust relationship” (pg. 8). The first several chapters of *She Who Is* focus on explaining feminist theology and its purpose as well as exploring the need for more emancipatory language about God (i.e. language that is not exclusively male) citing a wide range of theologians, both contemporary and classical. Emancipatory language about God seeks not to eliminate male symbols and imagery from the understanding of God but rather to weave female imagery into our understanding of the divine. Since God cannot be understood as either male or female, the exclusivity of male words and language serves to box God into a corner of maleness that our stubborn minds refuse to change. Emancipatory speech is needed to not only to break God out of this box but also to save the oppressed from the subjugation by emphasizing their humanity and connection with the divine. *She Who Is* is fundamental reading for anyone who has trouble reconciling faith with genuine feminist issues of representation in the Catholic Church, or anyone who is interested in learning how to transform the divine mystery from primarily male to a mystery connected to the feminine as well. This series of reflections focuses on the first six chapters of *She Who Is* from the perspective of a woman who has always felt like an outsider within the Catholic Church. I hope to reveal that there is not just the standard way to think about God, and rather than try to restrict our thinking to what is “correct” we should be expanding our

imaginations in new and creative ways that respect the dignity of every person, not just the ruling male.

The Problem with God



What is the right way to talk about God? How can we convey the mystery of God in a way that does not diminish or subordinate groups of people? I have never heard a comprehensive answer. I never noticed how restrictive God talk really is until recently reading *She Who Is* by Elizabeth Johnson. If God is truly a Him, what place do women have in world created by Him? Centuries of speaking about God in exclusively male terms has led to the misguided belief that God is male, or at least more male than female. I question if there is any way to remedy this in a way that stays true to own notion of God. Unfortunately the damage has already been done. It is no longer as simple as using feminine words to describe the complexity of God. Indeed if it was that easy would it not have been done already? What better way to describe the indescribable than combining the masculine and feminine in ways that cannot be observed in our human world? A God who is both mother and father is much more mysterious than one who is simply a father. Does not the unexplainable inspire much more awe than that which can be observed every day? There are those that seek to keep God purely masculine, as any change would shake the foundations of patriarchy that have existed over many millennia. The entire identity of the Christian faith would be called into question, as the symbol of God functions as a representative of the faith as a whole.

God is not an easy concept to describe, in fact it is an impossible concept to understand, much less describe. Our use of metaphor to describe God in terms that make sense is inadequate, so why should we not be able to use all words that describe the holy mystery as long as it is not against the sense of the Scripture. Historically there have been changes and questions when speaking about God. How can we now say with certainty that our current way of thinking and speaking is correct? Is there even a correct way? The male dominated speech that we hear so

regularly is largely a result of culture instead of pure Scriptural influence. It would be cumbersome and nearly impossible to speak about God using only biblical words, and indeed Aquinas even agrees that extra-biblical language is needed to describe the person of God. Clearly if using words not specifically used in the Bible to describe God is acceptable, then using words that are not traditional is not wrong either (pg. 3-6).

Women relegated to the outskirts of Church in order to keep the long-standing patriarchal structure alive. Women are trying to combat this inequality in within the Christian faith by attempting to change the masculine way we characterize God, and they are being dismissed in an effort to not upset the status quo. Feminist theology seeks to fix this inequality, not by claiming God is a woman, but by reimagining a God that both man and woman and something entirely unlike either (pg. 6).

There are so many things in the definition of Christian feminist theology that connect with me as I have also felt like an outsider in the tradition Christian theology for a long time. Women should be prized for their humanity, which is constantly violated by the sexism exist in the Church (pg. 8). Even the simple sexism of not allowing a 12 year old girl to serve at Mass because it was a 'boy's role' is an example of sexism that many Catholic girls experience growing up. I had no desire to be a server at Mass, but there is a difference between not wanting to do something and being told you cannot. Although serving Mass held no real appeal for me, I still resented not being allowed, purely based on my gender. For me this was the first overt example of sexism I experienced and recognized within my home parish. However, women have no need to identify themselves with men; we are separate and innately good because of both our similarities and differences from men. Both are reflected in the God who created both, Christ who saved both, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies both. In feminist theology there is no attempt

to elevate women over men; rather it is to recognize that both men and women are equally created, an idea that often seems to be misunderstood (pg. 8-12).

When it comes to classical theology the most interesting and amazing part is its ambiguity. Although it has seriously undermined women's well being, it has also created generations of ardently faithful women who have passed the faith on through the generations. "There are ways of speaking about God we do not know yet," this powerful quote speaks to me saying that this has always been true, and even as we unearth different and more diverse ways to speak about God, there will always be something new to uncover. Part of the beauty of an unexplainable God is that God will never be fully understood and there will always be something new to uncover (pg. 8-12).

A new question is ideal for a critical and living tradition. But if that question causes the very foundation of a faith to change the scotoma exhibited by official leaders is jarring. The use of scotoma to describe the hardening of the mind against unwanted knowledge is especially potent here as it refers to a literal blind spot in thinking. This happens to entire communities when knowledge is painful or will reveal that what they have always believed is not true in its entirety. Thus the group's well-being becomes more important than intelligence and wisdom stagnates. Limiting God-talk in relation to women is an example of scotoma and Johnson claims the only way to fix it is conversion. If the glory of God is human beings, it then makes sense that any suffering of humans is a diminishment of the same glory. People suffer every day in the name of God, and this perversion of what is good serves only to protect our own fragile human egos. Women must be included in the glory of God and as such wherever there is sexism that too diminishes God's glory (pg. 13-16).

Let Us Make Man in Our Image (Not the other way around)



Theology from the perspective of the oppressed gives terrifying insight into the traditions about God-speech that the Christian Church holds so dear. In fact looking through a different lens reveals that traditional speech about God is oppressive and idolatrous in its maleness.

As previously mentioned God-talk is exclusively male, however Johnson argues that it is literal and patriarchal as well. The exclusivity of God with maleness shows the dearth of any other kind of nouns or pronouns used to describe God. Any source or writing that refers to God in the feminine (or just not masculine) has been forgotten or pushed to the margins of society. Now every source of authority that exists clearly describes God as a male. This does not just apply to the male Jesus of Nazareth, but extends to God the Father, and even the Holy Spirit (who is arguably the most ambiguous member of the Trinity). Johnson's argument that 'Father and Son' was meant to signify a relationship between Jesus and God, not the gender of either is an incredibly interesting one (pg. 17-33). Although I have no objection to referring to Jesus in the masculine (at least regarding his human gender), there is simply no reason to automatically ascribe masculinity to God the Father as well. There is even less reason to ascribe masculinity to the Holy Spirit, who is never described as masculine or feminine but as and 'it' in Scripture, and yet both these Trinitarian persons are only ever referred to as male, at least in oral speech. Why is the Church so reluctant to use femininity to denote even one member of the Holy Trinity if not to continue and condone the rampant sexism that exists within the Church?

When it comes to God, the Church may officially preach about a God who is beyond gender, but in practice this is not the case. We associate God with maleness so strongly that anything else seems to detract from God. Any type of speech that describes God as female or not male seems wrong in our culture, even to the young (pg. 33). When I was about 15 years old I

corrected my friend who wrote about God using feminine pronouns. I claimed that this was not the correct way to talk about God since God was a man. Looking back on that one instance I feel so much regret for that moment and my own deep misunderstanding of who God is. My friend was attempting to create a God she could relate to, since she herself was female, why could God not look like her? Instead of encouraging my friend or opening my mind to the possibility (indeed the actuality) that God was something beyond our human conception of gender, I repeated what had been drilled in my head since early childhood and felt superior because of it. I wish that I had had the courage of my friend to try something new and explore a side of God that was forbidden to me as a woman. The exclusivity and literalness of a male God has so dominated Christianity that to use new words seems wrong and makes God seem inferior when in fact God created women in his image just as he created men. There is no theological need for such literal speech, and in fact it only serves to help oppress much of its laity. Those who cannot associate themselves with the divine (i.e. women) are isolated from enjoying the same likeness with God that is provided to men (pg. 33-34).

Finally this male dominant speech is patriarchal and provides the symbol of a ruling man. God is not just a man, He is a king, and He is not just a king He is the Lord. Everyone owes Him obedience and unquestioning loyalty. This is the ideal world for everyone, men and women. We all want to be like the Supreme Being who everyone adores and listens to. But if God is male then that gives men hope and a reason to believe that they too are the king, while telling women they are not fit to be a ruler. All men might not be king of a kingdom, but they have the potential to be the ruler of a household, one in which all women and children are obedient to him. He has one place where he is unquestioningly in charge (pg. 34). However, this is not just a man's desire. Women desire this kind of 'kingship' too. The difference is that it can be a reality for

most men, but only for a small portion of women. That is because our ultimate symbol for leadership is a male God. It seems natural for a male to be in charge but unnatural for a women. This is why the patriarchal function of a male God is the most concerning for me personally. It both demeans women as inferior and unfit, while giving men, who have all the power to make such changes, very little motivation to make them, since any change in the language of God would not affect them in a large proportion. What I mean by this is that acknowledging God as something both female and male would not alienate men from godliness, but it would draw women closer to godliness. In other words, men would not find themselves farther away from God, but they would no longer be the only images of God, whereas women would be acknowledged as an image of God.

The close of this chapter was a discussion stating that the male language surrounding God is not only dangerous for women but potentially dangerous for everyone since it is idolatrous in nature. A representation of the divine as a symbol for humans creates an idol. In essence men have modeled God after themselves, instead of modeling themselves after God. Throughout the ages the Church has proclaimed that human are made in the image of God but instead of practicing this they have twisted it into God is created in the image of man. By attributing these human characteristics of man (even the ideal man), God is severely limited and as such we are no longer worshipping God as God is, but rather the God we have created. In other words we are worshipping an idol. By limiting God in this way, the Church has cut itself off from the knowledge of God's full self, something that as humans we can never understand. Instead of accepting this, the Church attempts to put God in a male box, to fit human agendas (pg. 39-41).

Mother, Father, Sister, Friend



The word God itself has become androcentric, thus our very imagining of God is solely in the male form (pg. 42). What then is the best and most effective way to change this? Do we disregard the word God altogether? Some certainly have suggested this with options such as God/ess being designated as a new word to understand the divine. Of course God/ess, though it works well for written text, is an unpronounceable term and thus has certain limitations (pg. 42). Another more feasible option in my opinion is the Word. Though it has been used in a scriptural context to refer to the divine, Word does not have any immediate gender connotations and has the added bonus of being exactly what women are trying to claim back, their *words*. Johnson, although she acknowledges the usefulness of this designation for God, ultimately rejects it because of its connotations within classical theology and its connection to the human male person manifested in Jesus Christ. Although Johnson rejects both these ideas as sufficient for conveying the masculine and feminine in God, I think both need more consideration, particularly the God/ess. Even though it is unpronounceable, it is a starting place and the easiest way of understanding God presented so far in *She Who Is*. Just because the word is unpronounceable does not mean it does not have use, such that God/ess can be used when writing about God, while a different non-gendered term (maybe Word or Mystery) could be used while speaking orally about God. Although a change of the very language of God would be an incredibly difficult and slow-moving process, I think this change would be the most easily accepted since it uses words we are familiar with but changes them to encompass more of the true mystery surrounding God.

Just as the word God is androcentric, the metaphors and symbols often used to represent the divine are almost entirely male and have been for so long that they are ingrained in our imagination. Thus simply correcting these misconceptions by omitting pronouns and gendered

symbols is not enough. In our consciousness God is associated with maleness. Just using the word God to describe the divine is not only limiting in our imagination, as it stifles the insight that using female symbols could bring the holy mystery. It also does not address the implication that women's reality cannot represent God (p. 44-45). God is a tricky concept to discuss (as it should be!) because our imaginations simply cannot stretch enough to fully understand what God is. Should we only speak about God in nonpersonal terms as some theologians do, or speak about God personally since many of God's aspects are human-like? And after the personable God is spoken of comes the question of gender. In order to destroy the male-only metaphor other symbols need to be used, particularly feminine symbols. This is easier said than done because in order to achieve a truly gender-neutral deity feminine symbols cannot be the only symbols for God, so that this exercise runs the risk of stereotyping women further by using traditional symbols for women's experience such as nurturing and caring (p. 45). Though these traits are commonly found in women, it is important to understand that not all women possess these traits to the same extent and women can just as easily be intelligent, just, and assertive. Symbols thus give rise to images, and when it comes to the divine images are incredibly important, which is why there is a need to incorporate female symbols into our understanding of God. When men think about God they imagine a male figure, comparable to themselves, but women imagine some distant man who has less in common with them. It is extremely important to challenge this view, first by supplanting male symbols with female ones, and then creating an image of God that incorporates both the female and male aspects. Although it would take time I believe it could be done, but the above-mentioned risks with this exercise would need to be considered and avoided.

While the idea of female symbols for God, while still using the word God, seems simple it is not nearly as easy as it seems. Creating female symbols is not the same as simply adding feminine traits to the God or creating an entire female dimension of God. With the introduction of feminine traits to God, we run into the problem of simply adding some femininity to a predominantly male God (p. 47). In essence this changes very little about the imagined God. God the Father is often associated with not so great male traits of aggressiveness and dominance and the addition of feminine traits serves to temper this association with more caring attributes. Thus instead of putting the feminine in God, it actually serves to create an ideal male image of God. Since this ideal man is still clearly and directly associated with men and only nominally connects to females, this way of thinking is not enough to change the male image of God.

Another problematic way to counter the male God is to introduce a female dimension of God usually found in the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This imagery, rather than liberating women and elevating them to a person in the Trinity, limits women to stereotypical roles and is prescribed mostly by (well-intentioned) male theologians (p. 51). Even if the Holy Spirit is imagined as a woman she is still outnumbered in the person of God by two concrete male persons. What is more, envisioning a female Holy Spirit is ambiguous at best, since imagery is most often a dove, and a dove, while lovely, is not a sufficient image for women. Using a dove alongside two concrete male images can even seek to diminish women further, since a bird is more easily imagined within the Trinity than a concrete female. Another problematic attempt has been to use the Virgin Mary as the face of the female person of the Trinity. This is problematic because it sums up the whole of female experience into 'virgin' and 'mother,' terms that do not even come close to capturing the whole of women's experience (p. 52). There is also the problem of subservience. In a recent conversation with my father he

pointed to the Virgin Mary as proof that the Church celebrates women and proof that a female connection with God was unnecessary. What he failed to understand was that Mary is celebrated for her servitude to a male God. Even if she is a celebrated woman it is only because she did what a male God asked, much as the Holy Spirit is a mediator for God to the human race. Women must have a stronger model than a mediator who is subservient to two concrete male persons or a human woman who does what she is told.

Johnson makes it clear that symbols are not meant to convey a part of God, but rather the whole mystery of God. It becomes easy to speak of a female part of God and a male part of God, but if true equality in God is to be imagined this cannot happen. Both female and male symbols convey the whole person of God, just like a mineral symbol (God is a rock) conveys the wholeness of God (p. 54). Gender only becomes an important characteristic of God within the last several centuries, because, earlier, gender did not define personality characteristics like it does now. Thus the full reality of both men and women needs to be used when symbolizing God so as to liberate all people, not simply elevate one sex above the other.

We are God, God is US



Crucial to liberating speech about God is the experience of conversion, or a turning of the heart and mind that sets life in a new direction (p. 62). In women this conversion is a rebirth of sorts and happens through contrast and confirmation. To achieve conversion through contrast involves a sense of indignation at the wrongs suffered by women throughout the centuries. The blatant suffering resulting from sexism coupled with the reality of female dignity leads to a judgment that we as women are worth more than the patriarchal system will have us believe. Thus there is a contrast between what is and what ought to be in regards to women's lives and dignity. Confirmation entails a different approach of remembering the courage and creativity of historical women and the comfort and strength they found within the Christian tradition despite its sexism. This remembrance forms solidarity between all women, which forms an unbreakable community. This solidarity then leads to the realizations that women are nothing less than fully human persons and genuine children of God. So both contrast and confirmation together bring about a conversion in thought and action that can move mountains and transform thinking. Although, classically, conversion is thought of in terms of the complete giving up of oneself, when it comes to those already partly divested of themselves (i.e. anyone who faces injustice because of who they are) it is more correct that conversion entails a full recognition of who they are and an affirmation that they too are a gift from God (p. 62-64). I have always been taught the classical notion of conversion; where I am to give myself up completely in order to find God. As Johnson points out, this is all well and good for those in power positions, but for those of us who are already in a subordinate situation, the divesting of self only serves to further subordinate. The idea that in order to find God, I must find myself is a daunting one since I have always been told

to do the opposite. It is both terrifying and exhilarating to discover that who I am is not bad but something to be embraced.

There is a distinct connection between the self and God, so much so that our capacity for reasoning and looking for meaning beyond what we see orients us toward God in a uniquely human way. Although we are never able to directly experience God, we can see glimpses when we are essentially being the most human. It is only when we seek the humanness within ourselves that we experience God in his mysterious form. Thus God is intrinsically connected to our expressions of self and developing that self also develops a Godly experience. Experiencing the mystery of God through this extremely personal self-acceptance changes our entire concept of God as one with power over us to one with power through us, thus empowering God and humans (p. 65-67). Finding God in ourselves is essential to loving God as God deserves to be loved. God is within each of us and made us who we are. Who, then, are we to shy away from this person that God crafted by disowning our hearts and minds? We should be searching to find ourselves not discarding ourselves. According to Johnson, yes that is exactly what we should be doing if we want to truly experience God. God is found in the personal, in our most human failings. I have heard that feelings can be the greatest obstacle toward God, and they must be overcome if we are to truly experience the divine mystery. Why should we reject the most integral part of ourselves, the part that makes us most like God? These primal instincts that are simply part of who we are should not be abandoned, rather they should be celebrated as a means of bringing us closer to our Creator.

When it comes to ethics, the feminist goal is to make sure that concern for women's wellbeing is promoted to the level of concern for men's wellbeing and to recognize the simple truth that women should be valued for their inherent humanness. There is also a drawing away

from the development of self through separation, but instead it is important to develop the self with others in a relationship that is advantageous to both parties. Instead of drawing an idea of the self that is separate from others or dependent on others, there needs to be an equivalence between the two. Friendship comes closest to symbolizing this relationship, as both parties in a friendship draw from each other strength each other in a mutual relationship. This relationship then ensures that all people are flourishing. Thus God is no longer a dualistic being ruling over the world, but a being who is within the world, growing and connecting with what God has created (p. 67-69). Thinking in terms of friendship helps to clarify the message that we can be our own selves without being separate from others. I have always had trouble with the notion of finding and developing myself in a vacuum. Being part of a group, whether a community, family, or friendship, has always given such strength and made me feel most myself. Thinking of God in terms of a friend who is helping to develop who I am is comforting in a way that I did not expect. There is a certain beauty to the notion that God cares so much about me that he is there in my darkest times to guide me through this extraordinary journey to myself, but that I do not have to do it without the support of others around me.

If experience of self is experience of God, then according to their own dignity women can and should act in *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*. Indeed all people are *imago Dei* (the image of God) regardless of gender. The *imago* has been so construed that physical sex has become a quality of something it was never supposed to represent. In both creation stories man is not created before woman or created solely in the image of God. Both are created simultaneously in the image of God in Genesis 1, and both are created simultaneously from an amorphous creature in Genesis 2. Clearly both sexes were created in the image of God and plainly are *imago Dei*. Likewise all people are called to be bearers of *imago Christi* (the image of Christ). This is more

difficult to grasp because identification of Christ has become synonymous with the person of Jesus. Thus since Jesus was physically male, it is assumed that one must be male to fully bear the image of Christ. However, we are all part of the body of Christ, as is reiterated many times in the Bible. Male and female are unimportant, since to be bearers of *imago Christi* one must live like Christ, who is beyond gender. We are all part of Christ's body, as Christ himself is so much more than the historical person Jesus of Nazareth (p. 69-75). If women are both *imago Dei* and bearers of *imago Christi*, theoretically there should be no function forbidden to women within the Church. An argument I have often heard for women being excluded from the priesthood is that priests must work in *persona Christi* (the person of Christ), which is something women cannot do (presumably because of their sex). After reading this chapter it is clear that women are absolutely able to bear full witness to Christ. If women are allowed to give their lives for Christ, why should they not be able to celebrate him fully as a leader of the Church? I can think of no higher honor than to celebrate Christ in such a close and personal way. How amazing would be to discover God while literally acting as he did during his last moments of life? Instead women are excluded from this experience for no reason other than their sex. There is nothing in God or Christ that women are unconnected to or connected less than men, and there should be no practice that women are forbidden from based on sex alone. If women truly are created in the image of God and charged to bear witness to Christ, then it follows that they should be able to perform all the functions a man can in Church.

Shekinah, Sophia, Mother



With the abundance of female images in the Scripture, it is important to understand them not as a complement to God, but a true representation of God that is just as scripturally valid as male imagery. Female images generated from reading Scripture include the Spirit (shekinah), wisdom (Sophia), and mother imagery (p. 82).

In traditional Jewish texts God is referred to as shekinah, a female mothering spirit of God who dwells with the people. She is spoken of as sheltering her people and protecting them from harm, personified as water, fire and, most potently, a dove. These images are not personal, rather, they serve to illustrate the creativity of God within the world. The dove in particular is associated with strong female images, such as an Eastern mother deity. Other imagery invoked in connection to shekinah involve typical women's work, scrubbing, delivering children, nursing children, grieving for destruction, and so on. Even within the Gospels the Spirit is spoken of in connection with Jesus's healing ministry and his baptism, where a dove descends on him. Over time the maternal image of the Spirit of God migrated to the Church itself and Mary, Mother of Jesus, who makes up the strongest maternal images within the Church today, while the shekinah is mostly forgotten (pg. 82-86).

Perhaps the most well defined personification of the female God is Wisdom. She is depicted in a myriad of female ways such as sister, mother, hostess, and preacher. Throughout Scripture Sophia is shown as a divine being with creative and salvific power equaling that of God (p. 87-90). She can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but the most conclusive path is that she is the female personification of God and his equivalent. All the actions of Sophia are performed elsewhere in Scripture by the unpronounceable God of the Israelites (YHWH), thus the idea that Sophia is the female personification of YHWH is possible, even probable, since it

also fits with the one God of Israel. They are not separate entities, but one and the same (p. 90-93). Within the Book of Wisdom, Sophia and the Spirit are closely identified, perhaps one and the same, as female personifications of God (p. 94). Even further in Christian tradition, Sophia is identified with Jesus. The actions of Sophia, taken from Jewish texts were attributed to Jesus, such as him being the image of an invisible God, the one through whom all things were made, etc. Indeed Jesus is so closely associated with Sophia that he can be seen not just as her messenger, but as the incarnation of Sophia herself. Particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is shown doing Sophia's work, caring for those in need and offering to take their suffering upon himself. John's Gospel is even more influenced by Wisdom literature, however he often substitutes the female Wisdom for logos. This is probably in reaction to the Greek depiction of the female as the personification of evil, and the adoption of Sophia by gnostic heresies in the early days of Christianity. And just as the Spirit imagery was mostly absorbed into the Holy Mother Church and Mary of Nazareth, so too was wisdom passed on to Mary, who became known as the Seat of Wisdom (p. 94-100).

Finally we come to the image of mother. Though we must take pain to remember that not all of women's experience is simply motherhood, this is unquestionably a unique and powerful experience of what it means to be a female. Creating and sustaining new life is a powerful descriptor of both women and God. Through the Scripture there is reference to God in motherly imagery, such as childbirth, midwifery, and nursing. God is also describes as a mother bear who is fiercely protective of her children. Even the Hebrew word for womb is related to the verb "to show merciful compassion." Thus a God described as merciful is literally a God whose womb is trembling with compassion. This motherly compassion is not entirely forgotten in Christian tradition, but is ascribed to the fatherly God of Jesus while the mothering imagery is passed to

Mary. She functions almost as a maternal God to her people while God is the father figure. She is the most exalted woman in the Christian tradition and venerated for her motherly characteristics (p. 100-103).

The female imagery provided in the Bible is more pervasive than I was ever taught. I have always been fascinated with Scripture and am of the opinion that Scripture is one of the best providers of God images. It is almost embarrassing to realize how much I missed in my readings that point to a powerful female God just as they point to a powerful male God. Although I learned about the Spirit of God in Church and school, I was never taught the female connotations contained within this image. There is so much I was never taught, either deliberately or because the people who were teaching me had no understanding either. Shekinah is so much more than just another form of the Father God we are taught about, but it is the mothering God that is forgotten. Just as the mothering Spirit is overlooked or has merged with other people/things in Christian theology, the character of Wisdom is likewise transformed into something else. A close reading of Scripture seems to verify that Sophia is both female and God. This identification of Sophia as the female personification of God is the easiest way to understand how God can be both female and male, but in the end God transcends gender. I cannot help but think of my mother when reading about Sophia, since she often cites Wisdom literature as proof that the bible includes powerful female images. However, her thinking is flawed because she thinks of Sophia more as a complementary, subordinate creation of God, while the male God remains superior. This is through no fault of her own, merely what she has been taught. Listening to her cite Wisdom literature lets me know that she is seeking to find the feminine in God, even if that is something she is unaware of. I really hope to teach her just this one thing if nothing else, since I sincerely believe she will be receptive to the idea of a female

personification of God in Sophia. When it comes to the mother image of God, I am conflicted. Although I recognize that mothering is a fundamental part of womanhood, there are women who are not mothers, do not wish to be mother, or desperately wish to be mothers but cannot. This association of God as a mother still cuts out the women who do not have the experience of motherhood. There is after all more to being a woman than being a mother, a point Johnson acknowledges. However much of the female imagery of God revolves around motherhood, so I understand that the image of a mother is necessary to include, but I think it needs to be applied carefully so as to not be stereotypic. Finally I find it intriguing that nearly all the female imagery presented in the Hebrew Scripture is co-opted by the Christian tradition, but moved from identification with the divine to identification with a human woman (holy and venerable to be sure but still human) and a theoretical Mother Church. Although the intention was perhaps not meant to cause harm, transferring female imagery from the divine God and instead placing it upon humans and an institution eventually serves to fuel the sexism existent within Christianity.

“If you have understood, It is not God”



To speak of the mystery of God is no easy task and one that has been explored throughout the centuries. Many ancient teachers have developed resources for God-speech that are also crucial to developing emancipatory speech about God. These include God's incomprehensibility, the use of analogy, and the necessity of many names for God (pg. 104).

God is unlike anything humans have ever encountered and therefore is something that can never be understood within the context of our world. It is not that God does not wish to reveal himself to us, but that our human minds and intelligence simply cannot grasp the vastness of God. Thomas Aquinas famously said, "If you have understood, what you have understood is not God." There is a depth to God that is so far beyond our capacity for knowledge that it is impossible that our minds will comprehend it. Even though revelation of God has clouded the minds of some into thinking that the incomprehensibility has diminished, nothing can be further from the truth. Even revelations from God cannot dissolve the mystery surrounding the divine essence. Even the name YHWH from the Old Testament reveals the mystery of God in its unpronounceable fashion. There are many references to God's incomprehensibility throughout the Old Testament, from God's own ban of images (in the Ten Commandments) to the Paul's letters in the New Testament that proclaim the vastness of God's mystery. Christians are then placed in an agnostic situation where the closest knowledge of God is acknowledgement that we cannot know God. Augustine writes that although God is utterly transcendent and beyond our knowledge, the divine presence is closest when we love, for in that instant we are closer to God than we are to the object of our love. Teaching about the incomprehensibility of God helps to strengthen efforts toward emancipatory God-speech by using women's reality as symbols for God. This incomprehensibility also sheds light on the inadequacy of exclusively male metaphors and symbols for God (pg. 104-112).

If God is so far beyond our understanding how, then, are we supposed to talk about God without being utterly wrong or blasphemous? Analogy has been used since the very beginning of Christianity to relate God to our world, but it is important to remember that every metaphor, relationship, and attribute of the divine is human based, and thus really nothing like the actual divine reality. Any analogy about God must go through a purification process, then negated of all human meaning, which then allows the analogy to transcend its human creators and become superimminent and beyond our cognitive capacity. It is always important to remember that any analogy made to signify the divine might use human words and notions, but it is still utterly unhuman when referencing God. God is always so far beyond human understanding that even our words and attributes are not enough. God will always be infinitely greater than anything we can imagine and ultimately beyond our grasp of understanding. This understanding of the purpose of analogy is lost when it comes to the male metaphors used in God-speech. Use of female analogy is discouraged, meaning that the male metaphors have not been stripped of their earthly significance and fence God into a male-only box. The use of analogy can have a huge impact on emancipatory speech about God only when male metaphors are negated and transcended as they are meant to be and female metaphors can be used alongside male ones without controversy (pg. 113-117).

What to call God is not complicated according to Christian Tradition. God is our Father, our King, our Lord. These male metaphors do little justice to God when the history of God's name is studied both in Christian and Jewish past, but also in African religions and Islam. The plethora of names and images that existed for God long before the virtual exclusivity of the already mentioned names are a fertile place to draw on the need for more emancipatory speech. The most common name for the divine in virtually all world religions is Creator, which is,

interestingly, not gendered. However there are many names that espouse a female symbol and names with a male symbol. In Islam there are 99 names for Allah and the hundredth name (God's true name) is found in the silence, and in many African countries God's name evokes both the powers of life and death of which God is the master. The list goes on and all are correct in that they portray some aspect of God. It must be remembered, though, that collecting names does not bring one closer to knowledge of God's true nature, since that can never be understood. These many names are pieces in a never-ending puzzle that will never be completed (pg. 117-120).

God's transcendence and utter incomprehensibility is what makes religion and faith so hard for some people, including me. Ever since I was a child I have needed to know how everything worked and why things were the way they were. My exasperated parents became experts at saying, "I do not know that is just how it is," or "Because I said so!" Accepting that I will never come closer to understanding God is discouraging and the reason I have strayed from faith so many times. Believing without seeing is the hallmark of faith, but it is something I have struggled with since I was old enough to understand the concept. I have always wanted to know more and thought it was owed to me by God to reveal the divine mystery to me. I studied theology extensively throughout high school, naively believing that if I learned enough I would come to understand God, or that God would see that I was smart enough to be shown the fullness of the divine mystery. I came to the painful realization that that just was not how faith worked and there are some things I just won't be able to know. It's still hard to believe in God fully without knowing everything, but it is comforting that God does not keep this knowledge from us because of some fault of ours or because God wishes to be mysterious. God is simply beyond our understanding and no amount of learning will get us to the place where we will be able to

understand God. I suppose it is called a mystery for a reason! While incomprehensibility makes faith difficult, it does help me to see God as something I can relate to as a woman because it reveals that God is definitely not a man. I, as a woman, am just as like (and thus unlike) God as any man and I have a connection to God that goes beyond anything anyone else can imagine. Every name for God signifies a relationship that is at once unique and shared by everyone. Taking a cue from the Islamic tradition, we can all find the true name of God in the silence, but that name is different to everyone and correct for everyone.

Conclusion

She Who Is was an interesting read that was both challenging and enlightening in its complexity. The need for a God that applies equally to all persons has always been in the back of my mind but this reading not only brought it to the forefront, it helped me to understand my reluctance to participate in a faith I had always felt excluded from. The necessity of emancipatory language for God is apparent now more than ever, as the ruling man fiercely grips onto his exclusive hold on God speech. The critical response from the Church hierarchy toward *She Who Is* reveals just how deep the desire to preserve this traditional way of speech is. If we are ever going to have a society that is equivalent there must first be an equal God who represents everyone, not just a select group. Placing God in the box of masculinity not only does a disservice to all non-male humans, but to the divine being as well. There is no way for our human minds to comprehend the incomprehensibility of God, but identifying God with the masculine serves to create an image of God that is just plain wrong. Understanding that man is made in the image of God does not mean that we can create God in the image of man, and to do so is inherently blasphemous. Female imagery and symbols must be associated with God if we are to speak about God because to not do so ignores the complexity and mystery of God while also oppressing anyone who is female. The time for emancipatory speech is now and after 25 years, *She Who Is* continues to inspire and relate this need to the Christian community.